

## Julie's sermon on Matthew 18: 15-20 – 6th September 2020

I am sure that reading from Matthew will have made 1 or 2 of us squirm this morning! We are never comfortable when there is bad feeling between people; either when we are part of it ourselves or when we can see it happening to others! Conflict itself is not a good thing but it should always be dealt with so that it cannot be the thing that divides people!

Years ago, a large statue of Jesus was erected high in the Andes Mountains on the border between Argentina and Chile. Called "Christ of the Andes," the statue symbolized a promise between the two countries that as long as the statue stands, there will be peace between them. Not long after it was built however, the Chileans got angry and wanted to forget that promise – you see - the statue had its back turned to Chile. Just when tempers were at their highest, a newspaperman saved the day. In an editorial that not only satisfied the people but made them laugh, he simply said, "The people of Argentina need more watching over than the Chileans."

Isn't it true that very often our divisions are caused by something silly, and we forget the value of our relationships and get caught up in that silliness. And the sad thing is that we as Christians are no different than those outside the church – when disagreements arise we come out fighting. The thing that is different about us is that as Christians we ask God to give us his blessing; we want him to hear our prayers; we want him to be with us when we need him and to watch over us even when we don't. But when he intervenes in our conflicts we don't want to know. Any restraint the Holy Spirit offers in showing us how to be humble and apologise is set aside in favour of getting in the last word or letting everyone else know how we've been wronged. But here's the deal, if we fail to obey the Lord's directions regarding how we handle conflict, what RIGHT do we have to expect His blessings?? Why should he listen to our prayers and how can he guide us if we are deaf to his message. Surely we should be looking at Jesus and asking how we can follow him and obey his commands. In that reading we heard this morning we are told we have to do 3 things to try to bring peace in conflict and pray that they work.

So what are the 3 things?

First, we need to be pro-active in settling conflict. In v. 15 it says, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault" You can't get any clearer than that – go and speak to them to resolve the problem.

Very often when we have been offended, we expect the offender to come to us and apologise but what if they don't even know they have offended us – how can they apologise. And even if they are aware they may think it will all go away on its own. If you are not happy with someone for something they have done then you need to tell them how you feel. It's scary but it will only fester within in you if you don't and you will never be able to find peace with that person until you do!

But you have to remember the second thing Jesus tells us – and that is to do it privately - he says in v. 15, "go and show him his fault, and then it says just between the 2 of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."

Jesus doesn't want us to be divided he wants us to be united and he wants us all to be able to sort out our differences before we involve others because they may have to take sides! It is nobody else's business and at this stage should be easy to resolve if you are both willing.

And by keeping it private, you are giving the offender an opportunity to make things right before it gains momentum and takes the conflict to a deeper, personal level, where bridges are often burned and there is no coming back. It is only at this point if unity cannot be found that Jesus tells us the 3<sup>rd</sup> thing we must do and that is to take the problem and ask someone to mediate! Not ideal but better than allowing it to fester and grow. Jesus said, "But if he will not listen, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or

three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

WHY is that so important?? Well because the alternative of an unresolved conflict is just not acceptable in the church family! We have to resolve things and if someone is being particularly disruptive and does not want to find a solution then you may need others to witness what is said so that it cannot be blown out of all proportion!

It is sad, but true, that not everyone will respond positively when you point out the error of their ways and they will want everyone to see it from their point of view and they won't listen. Jesus said in v. 17, “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

I think that is a bit harsh but who am I to argue with Jesus!! I mean, shouldn't we be concerned with getting people into church?? And here we are being told to kick them out?? What you need to understand here is that Jesus was saying that truth must prevail! We cannot ignore bad behaviour for the sake of bums on seats!

Their attitude and behaviour could easily spread and infect others who have befriended them. Surely losing one member is better than whole churches being divided because someone refuses to do the right thing??.

We all have to follow the teachings of Jesus and we have to ask ourselves what he would do in times of conflict and if you read your bible you will see that he did not stand idly by and watch the church or the people destroy themselves he intervened and sorted it out!

And he promises to be with us as we sort it out too - he says in v. 20 “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

This verse is often misquoted, and used to tell us that Jesus will be here with us no matter how small the gathering! But as you have heard this morning it is really a promise that he will be with us as we work through the difficult relationships we have and whether that is when 2 people meet to resolve the problem or a whole church family – Jesus will be in the midst of them.

As a church we need to be a team because team means together everyone achieves more and isn't that true. We can do so much more if we are united than if we are divided.

We all have disagreements – we are all human but it is what we do with them that matters! Talk to one another and don't let petty matters turn into huge conflicts.

Stand together and things can only get better and we will be stronger and able to fight against evil in all its guises.

There was a father who had 3 sons who could not agree on anything. When he found out that he was dying he called his sons to him and asked one of them to go out and bring him a bundle of sticks. The son did as he was asked and when he gave it to his father his father asked the oldest son to take the bundle and break it in half. The oldest son tried but the bundle was too strong for him. The next son laughed at his brother and took the bundle but he could not break them either and then the youngest son tried but to no avail. Then the father asked each son to take a stick out of the bundle and break it and of course they did it easily. When I die stand together and you will be strong but argue and fall out and you will be destroyed!

A simple story with a great message. Stand together and you cannot be broken but go it alone and beware!!

Jesus tells us to stand together and be united because when we do we can show others how to deal with conflict and the devils intent! So let's show them and share the love of God with them!

AMEN